

Fall 2007

## Dangers of Credulity: Mary Robinson and the Trope of Victimization

Jeffrey Paul Kozee

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# THE DANGERS OF CREDULITY: MARY ROBINSON AND THE TROPE OF VICTIMIZATION

by

JEFFREY PAUL KOZEE

(Under the Direction of Douglass Thomson)

## ABSTRACT

A prodigious professional poet admired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge; a courtesan idealized for her unparalleled beauty; a famed actress and mistress to royalty known to live beyond her means in an era of exploding print culture: Mary Robinson found herself portrayed incongruously in motley of mediums. While the leading portrait artists of the day, Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney, and Sir Joshua Reynolds, were painting dazzling portraits of Mrs. Robinson, she found herself lampooned in the satirical cartoons of James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson. The multifarious representations of Mary Robinson seem an apt commentary on her tumultuous life. Intriguing in their own right, these depictions present even more interesting issues. How did Mary Robinson respond to the images? How have these visual artists shaped our reception of Mary Robinson as an artist? How did the schism between the representations affect Robinson's art and own self-image?

INDEX WORDS: Mary Robinson, Victim, Self-image, Satirical cartoons, Portraits

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VICTIMIZATION

by

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2007

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Electronic Version Approved:

December 2007

## DEDICATION

For my wife

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the diligent commitment and contributions to my education on the part of all the faculty and staff at Georgia Southern University. Special thanks to Doug Thomson, Gautam Kundu, and Candy Schille for their help with this thesis.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

She is a woman of undoubted Genius...She overloads everything; but I never knew a human being with so *full* a mind—bad, good, and indifferent, I grant you, but full and overflowing.

-Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Robert Southey, 25 January 1800

Coleridge's comment is quite possibly the most often quoted appraisal of Robinson, and yet her reception throughout history often fails to reflect such warm sentiment. By all accounts, much of her life was a tumultuous struggle marked by dizzying highs and crushing lows. Falling in and out of graces with the gentry, enjoying a successful acting and writing career, and dying a reclusive cripple, Mary Robinson's life delineates interesting and complex relationships between the individual and society and, in turn, the intriguing correlations between the artist, the woman, and her art. Although just as prone to hyperbole as Coleridge's assessment of her literary talents, Mary Robinson's reflections on her own legacy paint a fuller representation of the conflicting images that have defined her throughout history. She writes in her Memoirs:

Probably these pages will be read when the hand that writes them moulders in the grave, when that God who judges all hearts will know how innocent I was of the smallest conjugal infidelity. I make this solemn asseveration because there have been malevolent spirits who, in the plenitude of their calumny, have slandered me by suspecting my fidelity even at this early period of my existence. These pages are the pages of truth, unadorned by romance and unembellished by the graces of phraseology, and I know that I have been sufficiently the victim of events

too well to become the tacit acquiescer where I have been grossly misrepresented. Alas! of all created beings I have been the most severely subjugated by circumstances more than by inclination. (83)

The juxtaposition of the Coleridge quotation and the Robinson passage is emblematic of the disparity between many of the representations of Mary Robinson. Coleridge, in the words of E. L. Griggs, “uncritically but chivalrously overestimated ‘Perdita’s’ work” (91). Griggs’ rather condescending commentary echoes those who believe that Robinson “like almost all minor poets was imitative, and not till the very end of her life were there models available to whom she could deeply respond,” but others like Lisa Vargo have argued that Mary exerted her own amount of influence over major Romantics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Vargo 134). The passage from Robinson’s Memoirs in and of itself presents dueling images of her persona that conflict with the one created by Coleridge as well. While she argues against a public representation of herself as an adulterous whore, she simultaneously subverts the calumny of the “malevolent” public and shapes herself as a helpless victim “most severely subjugated by circumstances.” Examining her extraordinary life and remarkable body of work, the idea of victimization, apparent in this passage, reappears frequently and prominently. Whether considering her affair and abandonment with King George IV, then Prince of Wales, her scathing treatment at the merciless hands of satirical cartoonists and a licentious public who drove the demand for their publication and trade, or the representation of victims in her writing, the theme of victimization seems unavoidable and central to an understanding of her art. The issue that remains for readers is how one addresses the idea of the victim when dealing with Mary Robinson and her writing. Like

so many facets of her life and career, victimization, as it appears in Robinson's writing, could be read as duplicitous. She was paraded by the Prince as a courtesan as he avowed his unrelenting love and affection and then abandoned her, but during that same time she was also married, which would seem to complicate the idea of her victimization at the hands of the Prince. But her marriage to a lying, gambling, adulterer further complicates an already complex picture, a complexity reflected in her creation of victims in her own poetry.

Although at times well warranted in her life, the role of Mary Robinson as victim must be subjected to scrutiny. The premise for victimization is most always present and legitimate, but the logic that follows is anything but lucid: while grounds for the theme of victimization manifest clearly in her biography and writing, one questions Mary Robinson's actual treatment of the theme. Is she merely writing to invite sympathy for herself as victim? Or can she create in her writings portrayals of victims that offer trenchant social criticism of the victimization of women and others marginalized by her material culture? These questions and others like them may have no certain answer, but in examining Robinson in light of these questions, one must keep in mind Coleridge's indemnification of her literary imagination. Always acutely aware of her audience onstage and off, in print and in public, Mary Robinson perpetually pays attention to the successes and failures of the artistic ventures around her. Armed with a working barometer of the public's artistic appetites, Robinson creates her enigmatic victim that allows her to "cast" herself in a preconceived social role, while still retaining some of her autonomy and advancing her agenda. She attempts to harness the credulity of a prying and prurient public to the vehicle of victimization, a vehicle that she refines and reworks

throughout her life and career to elicit pathos and invite sympathy, and at the same time she uses her pathetic victim as a means of self-aggrandizement or redemption and as a tool for social criticism. Possibly the pinnacle of her revision of the trope of the victim, Mary Robinson's Memoirs illustrates, more clearly than her poetry, how she shapes her biography to fit the role of the victim.

Mary Robinson was born “during a tempestuous night,” as she describes it in her Memoirs, and “a more stormy hour she [her mother] never remembered” (3). Robinson's account of the night she was born and single sentence summation of her life—“Through life the tempest has followed my footsteps, and I have in vain looked for a short interval of repose from the perseverance of sorrow”—illustrates quite candidly the idea of Mary Robinson as a victim (3). At the same time, the overt exaggeration and sensationalism of her birth-night and life call into question the motive of Robinson's portrayal of victimization in her Memoirs and subsequently the rest of her work. Written at the end of her arduous life, Robinson's Memoirs recapitulate, and perhaps attempt to reshape, a lifetime that was considered by many to be less than moral. As Sharon Setzer explains, “the Memoirs of Mary Robinson constitute a kind of retrospective exhibition designed to promote a re-evaluation of her character and an appreciative assessment of her acting and writing career” (501). To one familiar with her life, the duplicitous implications of victimization in Robinson's Memoirs becomes evident.

Mary Robinson was born Mary Darby in Bristol, November 27, 1758. Her father, Nicholas Darby, was a ship captain and merchant. His grandfather changed the family name from MacDermott to Darby in order to inherit an Irish estate. A prominent member of the Society of Merchant Venturers, Nicholas Darby established himself in the

Newfoundland fishing trade, and with the Society of Merchant Venturers, he made connections with many influential aristocrats. During the Seven Years War and bitter rivalries with the French over the Newfoundland fishing territories, Darby regularly reported to the British Board of Trade to inform them of French activities in the region. Here, he would meet the Earl of Bristol, Sir Hugh Palliser (who was appointed Governor of Newfoundland), and the Lord Chancellor, Robert Henley Earl of Northington. These connections would prove to be important in the life of Mary Robinson and how she perceived herself. Very much concerned with rank and gentility throughout her life, she used her father's interactions with Northington in her memoirs to elevate her father's merchant station. In detailing her father's scheme for establishing a whale fishery on the coast of Labrador, Robinson lists Northington amongst "several other equally distinguished personages" as "the chancellor Lord Northington, who was my godfather" (13). Paula Byrne, in her biography, Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson, describes Robinson as "always touchy" about issues of rank and gentility. She substantiates such a claim citing an unpublished, handwritten note in a manuscript of Robinson's Memoirs in which Mary Robinson, perhaps wistfully, writes, "Lord Northington the Chancellor was my Grandfather" (5).

Robinson needed no claims to authenticate her mother's gentility. Hester Darby was a descendant of a well-to-do family, the Seys of Boverton Castle in Glamorganshire, and a distant relation, by marriage, to the philosopher John Locke. Byrne asserts that Hester's parents did not approve of her union with Nicholas Darby because they would have expected her to marry into a landed family (5). Robinson mentions a similar notion in her memoirs: "My father was the object of my mother's choice, though her relations

rather wished her to form a matrimonial alliance with Mr. S[torr]" (7). She describes her mother as never being "what may be called a handsome woman" but "if there could be found a fault in the conduct of my mother towards her children, it was that of a too unlimited indulgence, a too tender care, which but little served to arm their breast against the perpetual arrows of mortal vicissitude" (6, 12). Mary Robinson's description of her mother portrays Hester as a maternal figure of sensibility. Interestingly, in describing her mother's love, Robinson portrays herself as victimized by the love of her overly indulgent mother. Through these descriptions, Robinson places the conception of her victimization with her own birth and upbringing. Although Mary Robinson would weather her share of the "perpetual arrows of moral vicissitude," she did not solely suffer from the indulgences of her mother or those of her father either. Besides being the proud owner of "one of Kirkman's finest" harpsichords, Mary Robinson was also the benefactor of an ample education provided for by her parents (Memoirs 10). Robinson claims in her memoirs that at age seven she could correctly repeat Alexander Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" and William Mason's "Elegy on the Death of the Beautiful Countess of Coventry," and as a child she took great delight in learning epitaphs and monumental inscriptions (9). Already this early in the recapitulation of her life story, readers are introduced to the all too common problem of credulity when examining Robinson's life and writing. The temptation for readers is to take the claim to memorization for a quaint story or stretch of the imagination on the part of Mary Robinson, but as Paula Byrne notes, Robinson consciously creates a self-image that appeals "to the romantic myth of the writer as a natural genius who begins as a precociously talented but lonely child escaping into the world of imagination" (6). Anne

K. Mellor echoes this assessment: “She [Robinson] portrays herself as the victim of a Gothic romance, born in the ruined abbey of Bristol Minster, entering a ‘world of duplicity and sorrow’ with a ‘sensitive and perpetually aching heart,’ destined by fate to love and to suffer through no fault of her own” (287). The elegies that Robinson claims to have memorized forcefully underscore her design for “recasting” her life in the highly literary role of the sentimental victim.

Like most aspects of Mary Robinson’s life, there is more to the elegies that she cites as having memorized than face-value or even an underlying reinforcement of the theme of sorrow in her life. As an author of sensational Gothic novels, Mary Robinson understands that the images she creates of herself as a little girl running through the cemetery, sitting at the foot of headstones, and gazing in studious fashion committing the inscriptions to memory are just the sort of things to satiate her readers’ sensibilities. Aware of the financial importance of her readers’ tastes, Robinson tweaks her victim motif to reflect the popular elements of the Gothic heroine, and she could remember well the importance of strained finances in her early life. Many Gothic heroines, such as Ann Radcliffe’s, become vulnerable due to financial failings of their elders. The picture that Mary paints in her Memoirs shows how her father’s economic failures haunt her throughout the remainder of her life.

What began as a delightful, even if melancholy, childhood, soon changed. While in Labrador to establish his whale fishery, Nicholas Darby left his wife, “who felt an invincible antipathy to the sea,” behind in London to care for the children, and he began an affair with a woman named Elenor, “whose resisting nerves could brave the stormy ocean, and who had consented to remain two years with him in the frozen wilds of



America” as described by Mary Robinson in her Memoirs (14, 17). Ultimately, his Labrador plans to establish a whale fishery, civilize the Eskimo Indians, and employ them in the fishery failed. After several Indian revolts culminating in the burning of the settlement and his boats being set adrift, Nicholas Darby set sail for London. Upon his return, Darby took up residence with his mistress and sent money to Hester for his children’s education.

Mary Robinson was sent to school in Chelsea to study under Meribah Lorrington. Robinson writes in her memoirs, “All that I ever learned I acquired from this extraordinary woman” (22). This estimate is a discredit to Hannah More and her sisters, who taught Mary previous to her attending the Lorrington Academy. She would indeed idealize Lorrington, who received a masculine education in the classics, modern languages, arithmetic, and astronomy from her schoolteacher father. In several of Robinson’s novels, her female characters benefit from similar educations. Her treatment of Lorrington stands in stark contrast to her opinions of her stay with the More sisters. According to Byrne, Robinson would describe her tenure with the More sisters stressing that “the education she received from the school was merely in feminine accomplishments of the sort that were required for the marriage market” (8). Robinson portrays Lorrington as a “new woman,” who, just as Hester Darby does, raises, tutors, and molds a “creature of sensibility” in Mary Robinson. It was under Lorrington’s tutelage that she “acquired a taste for books,” and she began to write poetry (Memoirs 23). She would preserve some of these early verses and publish them in her first volume of poetry, Poems, in 1775. Lorrington, however, was an alcoholic and would eventually

be forced to close her school due to her “one vice” and a “state of confirmed intoxication” during school hours (Memoirs 22, 26).

After Lorrington Academy closed its doors, Nicholas Darby cutoff his pecuniary support for his children’s education, and Mary Robinson was sent to a boarding school in Battersea. Hester Darby set up a school in Chelsea, one of the few respectable ways a genteel woman could earn a living (Denlinger 5). Robinson relates her mother’s determined maternal instinct in her Memoirs:

I adored my mother. She was the mildest, the most unoffending of existing mortals; her temper was cheerful, as her heart was innocent; she beheld her children as it seemed fatherless, and she resolved, by honourable means, to support them (26).

She would help her mother by teaching the pupils English, selecting “passages both in prose and verse” for their study (Memoirs 26). Just back from another American expedition and after running into more financial hardships, Darby forced Hester to close her school because he feared a working wife would damage his reputation. Mary Robinson describes her father’s reaction to Hester’s school:

The pride of his soul was deeply wounded by the step which my mother had taken; he was offended even beyond the bounds of reason; he considered his name as disgraced, his conjugal reputation tarnished, by the public mode which his wife had adopted of revealing to the world her unprotected situation (28, 29).

Judging from her comments, one can easily imagine the fiercely independent Mary Robinson holding onto this moment from her childhood. Her father had ruined the

family's finances, driven her mother into her "unprotected situation," and all but abandoned his family for his mistresses. Darby's conjugal hypocrisy would plague Robinson throughout her own relationships as she seemed only to model her father's behaviors. From her father's shoddy treatment of her mother to his erroneous financial decisions, Nicholas Darby forms the grounds for much of Mary Robinson's preoccupation with victimization. After her mother closed her school and moved with her children, Robinson would finish her own education at Oxford House, going from teacher to pupil.

If Hannah More taught her how to be a lady and Meribah Lorrington cultivated her poetic fancies, then Mrs. Hervey, the governess at Oxford House, can be credited for inspiring Mary Robinson's acting career. Mrs. Hervey mentioned Mary to Mr. Hussey, then ballet master at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, as "possessing an extraordinary genius for dramatic exhibitions," and eventually, Hester was persuaded to allow her daughter to pursue a stage career (Memoirs 31). Around this same time, Nicholas Darby, leaving once again for America, warned Hester, "Take care that no dishonour falls upon my daughter. If she is not safe at my return I will annihilate you!" (Memoirs 32) Darby's words are loaded with irony, very likely Robinson's intent writing her memoirs after years of public degradation. His words would have held a different significance for Robinson's contemporaries living in a culture that viewed actresses as a sexual commodity. Kristina Straub, in her book Sexual Suspects, examines the cultural discourse of the time that frequently conflated the professional actress with the professional courtesan. Both display their female bodies in public for the arousal and gratification of male voyeuristic desire. Straub comments, "eighteenth-century discourse

on actresses returns continually to the problematically public nature of their sexuality” (96). With this cultural awareness of the position of the actress in society and given Mary Robinson’s infamous acting career and very public sexuality, the irony of Darby’s parting words is disturbing for a modern reader or contemporary cynic, and yet Robinson may be using her father’s words to once again render herself a victim of her parents’ neglect. As she shapes the event in her memoirs, her father passes his paternal responsibility off on a mother of “too unlimited indulgence.”

It is no wonder Hester would protest to her daughter’s aspirations given the position of the actress in eighteenth-century society, but Mary Robinson relates in her memoirs that after “many cited examples of females who, even in that perilous and arduous situation, preserved an unspotted fame,” her mother consented (31). Robinson would then meet with Thomas Hull, an actor at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden. She recited lines from Nicholas Rowe’s Jane Shore. Hull was impressed, but the audition did not lead to any roles. Shortly there after, she was introduced to David Garrick by Samuel Cox, an affluent lawyer whom Hester placed herself under the protection of after closing her school. When Robinson met Garrick, she was only fourteen, and yet, as Paula Byrne writes, Garrick “was captivated by Mary’s loveliness” (19).

Whether it was her commanding figure or Garrick’s penchant for beautiful actresses, we may never know. Whatever the reason, Garrick soon resolved that she should play the “Cordelia” to his “Lear.” Meeting Garrick would prove to be a monumental moment for Mary Robinson. Judith Pascoe describes the beginning of this life-altering moment: “As Mary Darby was coming under the theatrical tutelage of

Garrick, she was also attracting public interest” (SP 24). The “public interest” in Mary Robinson acts as an agent of victimization in Robinson’s Memoirs as well.

Although Garrick dubbed Robinson for the part of “Cordelia,” the debut would not materialize onstage. She would not make her acting debut until December of 1776 as “Juliet” in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Auditioning as “Jane Shore,” rehearsing as “Cordelia,” debuting as “Juliet,” and starring in her most famous role as “Perdita,” Mary Robinson assumed stage roles that would continually place her in the role of the victim. However, Robinson had already begun to turn heads in London long before her notorious acting career. Frequenting the theatre for rehearsals with Garrick and shows, she caught the attention of several prominent men. Most notably, a law clerk named Thomas Robinson began to give special notice to her. She describes her growing appeal to the public in her memoirs, suggesting a predatory nature for her suitors:

I now found myself an object of attention whenever I appeared at the theatre. I had been too often in public not to be observed, and it was buzzed about that I was the juvenile pupil of Garrick—the promised Cordelia . . . Opposite to the house in which I resided lived John Vernon, Esq., an eminent solicitor. I observed a young inmate of his habitation frequently watching me with more than ordinary attention. He was handsome in person . . . Frequently when I approached the window of our drawing-room this young observer would bow or turn away with evident emotion. I related the circumstance to my mother, and from that time the lower shutters of our windows were perpetually closed. (36-8)

Robinson heightens the predatory image when she writes, “Every attention which was now paid to me augmented my dear mother’s apprehensions. She fancied every man a seducer, and every hour an hour of accumulating peril!” (38) Interestingly, now the men are referred to as “seducers” whereas just two pages earlier in her memoirs they were “suitors.” The technique that she employs is effective in underscoring and foreshadowing the duplicity of her husband to be, Thomas Robinson, the young law clerk spotted outside the window.

Thomas Robinson soon won over Mrs. Darby with his gifts of “elegantly bound” religious tomes and asked for her daughter’s hand in marriage (Memoirs 40). He promised Mary Robinson that he was the nephew and heir of a man of fortune, Thomas Harris of Tregunter, Wales, when in reality he was his illegitimate son. Robinson would not find out the truth until it was too late, and the two were married on April 12, 1773 at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Mary Robinson was then only fourteen. Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger, citing Nicholas Darby’s failed whale fishery and Hester Darby’s closed school, speculates that “it was perhaps these difficulties that led Mary Darby to marry so young, the faster to take herself off her mother’s hands” (5). Writing about the ostracizing effects of Nicholas Darby’s failed excursions on the family, Byrne notes, “[Mary] herself learned a valuable lesson at a particularly young age: loss of fortune and position swiftly loses friends. Dropped by the people who had been happy to take advantage of their former prosperity, the family were left bereft” (11). Perhaps Robinson allowed this lesson to creep into the back of her mind as she listened to Thomas’ promises of inherited wealth, faced with the decision of marriage or an independent career in the theatre.

Mary Robinson frames the story of her marriage banns so as to appear as the helpless victim of an arranged marriage and smallpox. She caught the disease from her brother, George. Having attended indefatigably to her brother's illness, Thomas Robinson likewise attended to her with the "zeal of a brother," and it was during this time "when a destructive disorder menaced [her] features . . . [that] that zeal made an impression of gratitude upon [Mary's] heart" (Memoirs 41-2). She writes, "During my illness Mr. Robinson so powerfully wrought upon the feelings of my mother, that she prevailed on me to promise, in case I should recover, to give him my hand in marriage . . . repeatedly urged and hourly reminded of my father's vow, I at last consented, and the banns were published while I was yet lying on a bed of sickness" (42). Thomas asked that the marriage be kept secret because he still had three months left as an articled clerk, and another young lady wanted to marry him. Despite "an almost instinctive repugnance at the thought of a clandestine marriage," and no feeling of esteem for Thomas, Mary would kneel at the altar with a heart as "free from any tender impression as it had been at the moment of [her] birth" (Memoirs 46-7).

These and other details that Robinson provides in her account of her marriage portray herself as an innocently naïve bride. She writes that she wore the habit of a Quaker during her wedding and that the vicar who performed the ceremony had "never before performed the office for so young a bride" (47). As the young bride of Thomas Robinson, Mary Robinson may have hoped to avoid the fate of her mother and the always risky occupation of an actress, but she would find herself a victim, both as a wife and an actress. Immediately following the ceremony, the wedding party repaired to the house of a female friend for breakfast, and she changed from her "dress to one of white muslin, a

chip hat adorned with white ribbons, a white sarsnet scarf-cloak, and slippers of white satin embroidered with silver” (47). Mary Darby, now Mary Robinson, had already begun to dress the part that would thrust her into the attention of an assiduous public. She writes that she mentions “these trifling circumstances because they lead to some others of more importance” (47-8). Writing her Memoirs, Robinson knew the full import of these “trifling circumstances,” but on her wedding day, she probably could not imagine the impact her appearance would have on the rest of her life. Her public representation in visual images would contribute in large part to the shaping of her artistic reception and her creation of a pathetic victim as she took on numerous authorial positions exploiting and opposing the influence of these images.



## CHAPTER 2

### VISUALIZING THE VICTIM

View the gay courtly dame, and mark her face...  
Beaux without number, daily round her swarm,  
And each with fulsome flatt'ry try's to charm.  
Till, like the rose, which blooms but for an hour,  
Her face grown common, loses all its power.  
Each idle coxcomb leaves the wretched fair,  
Alone to languish, and alone despair,  
To cards, and dice, the slighted maiden flies,  
And every fashionable vice apply's,  
Scandal and coffee, pass the morn away,  
At night a rout, an opera, or a play;  
Thus glide their life, partly through inclination,  
Yet more, because it is the reigning fashion.  
Thus giddy pleasures they alone pursue,  
Merely because, they've nothing else to do;  
Whatever can afford their hearts delight,  
No matter if the thing be wrong, or right;  
They will pursue it, tho' they be undone,  
They see their ruin, — still they venture on. (SP 73)

Mary Robinson's "Letter to a Friend on Leaving Town" reverberates with a prophetic irony. Most likely written while she was moving in and out of the fashionable

scenes of London before her stint in the Fleet Debtors' Prison, the poem was published in her first volume of poetry, Poems, in 1775 while she was still imprisoned. In the excerpt above, Robinson critically examines the folly of the aging coquette's pursuit of "giddy pleasures" and the society that only values appearance. With the undoing of the maiden's beauty by time and her abandonment by fickle companions, Robinson has already this early in her artistic career—she is seventeen—begun to explore the idea of a victim subject to forces beyond control. While a "gay and courtly dame" herself, Mary Robinson's own life follows a narrative similar to the "slighted maiden" from "Letter to a Friend on Leaving Town," and the visual representations of Robinson mirror the unpredictability of a culture based on appearance. In a period of theatrics where presentation preempted substance, Mary Robinson's theatrical career inundated London with her image, and as quickly as she was heralded as a "theatrical genius in the rough" with features that "when properly animated are striking, and expressive," she would find herself vilified in the press (Byrne 72). From her own victimization in the popular prints to her ambiguously flattering high portraits, the image of Mary Robinson as victim and victimizer simultaneously circulated the city as a commodity. Tracing the circulation of her image, one discovers a potential visual inspiration for Mary Robinson's creation of her persona as a pathetic victim as she thoughtfully shifts her public perception from victimizer to victim.

The similarities between the "gay courtly dame" and Mary Robinson's life are uncanny, and one might wish that she would have hearkened to her own advice, but who could blame her for wanting something more than the conniving, unfaithful, and financially ruined husband that Thomas Robinson turned out to be. Though free to come

and go at will, Mary Robinson stayed with her husband and six-month old daughter, Maria Elizabeth, in the Fleet for fifteen months. The only times she left the prison were to visit with Georgiana the Duchess of Devonshire. The Duchess offered Mary Robinson some pecuniary support and enabled the publication of her Poems (1775). Once the Robinsons were released from the Fleet, Mary sent the Duchess a letter stating such, and the Duchess sent her a congratulatory letter in return. Robinson then moved with her husband and young daughter to Old Bond Street, taking up lodgings with a confectioner, to be close to Vauxhall, the preeminent pleasure garden in London. Jonathan Tyers created the gardens to be a “place of leisure and harmony, in which customers could stroll in the grounds while listening to instrumental and vocal music” (Brewer 377). Although the gardens were extremely popular with fashionable society, they were also “slightly risqué since their alleys, supper boxes and dark corners offered opportunities for sexual intrigue” (377). Even though Robinson’s move evinces the same “moth-to-the-flame” comportment that she critiques in “Letter to a Friend on Leaving Town,” the move turned out to be a profitable one in terms of her theatrical career. Dining with William Brereton, an actor who recognized Robinson walking in St. James Park, she announced her intentions on reviving her theatrical career. Brereton would several years later play Florizel to Robinson’s Perdita in The Winter’s Tale. Some time after that dinner when the Robinsons had moved to Newman-Street, Brereton paid an unexpected visit to introduce Mary Robinson to Richard Sheridan, the new manager of the Drury Lane Theatre. With the support and backing of David Garrick, she was soon cast by Sheridan as Juliet in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, a long anticipated debut postponed by the miscarriage of her first child and confinement in Fleet Prison.

Theatre in London during the latter half of the eighteenth-century hardly resembled that of the twenty-first. Theatre-goers in the eighteenth-century attended plays for reasons foreign to twenty-first century spectators in playhouses that differ greatly from our conception of a theatre. The most notable difference between the theatre of Robinson's debut and modern realist theatre would have been the absence of the "fourth wall," or the assumed division between the actors and the spectators. At the Drury Lane Theatre prior to 1765, the auditorium remained lit during shows by large chandeliers that David Garrick ordered removed that year and replaced with oil lamps in the wings (Brewer 327, Byrne 68). As opposed to division, the lighted auditorium engendered a rapport between spectators and actors (Byrne 69). This rapport was highlighted by spectators sitting on stage during the play until they were removed by Garrick in 1762 (Brewer 327). When sitting onstage, the spectators proved boisterous and obstructive. Paula Byrne cites an infamous occasion when a near rape occurred in full view of the audience (68). After removing the onstage seating, Garrick would increase the number of footlights and mount batteries of lights on moving poles with reflectors in the wings. Garrick had removed some of the largest distractions from play production, made the auditorium darker, the stage brighter, and increased the opportunities for special lighting effects, but despite all his efforts to focus the audience's attention on the play, Garrick could not overhaul the attitudes of theatre-goers. Just as before when the auditorium was lit, many of the audience members of Mary Robinson's career were largely concerned with who was *attending* the show, not who was *performing*. The house lights would not be put completely out because the audience came to the theatre to look at each other as much as to look at the players. The aristocracy and gentry came to sit in their boxes and

stare at themselves as if in a mirror (Byrne 69). Eighteenth-century London's fascination with fashion fueled the voyeuristic tendencies of the spectators and contributed to the increasing culture of celebrity that only further propagated the public's obsession with dress.

What was shaping up at the end of the Eighteenth-century in London theatre was a "perfect storm" that, while it would create a celebrity of Mary Robinson, would also leave her destitute. Similar to the "slighted maiden" at the mercy of relentless time and fickle fashion in her "Letter to a Friend on Leaving Town," Mary Robinson would become utterly consumed by a culture craving celebrity and by mores that on the other hand opposed every facet of such a star culture. While her reputation as an actress brought her celebrity, Mary Robinson's affiliation with the theatre also made her a perfect fit for the role of seducer and victimizer. The theatre was viewed as a place of trickery and deceit by English Protestants, and the theatre was still under the intense scrutiny of the Puritans (Brewer 333). Protestants saw the stage as full of illusions and magic "similar to those which the Roman Catholic church had used to bamboozle ignorant believers into becoming credulous believers" (Brewer 333). Protestants held both play-going and attending mass as forms of idolatry (333). The Puritanical objections to the theatre were decidedly moral. Actors made the stage seductive. The Case of the Stage in Ireland perfectly describes this view of theatre:

[Female Performers] are generally handsome, or have the Arts of making themselves appear so; they possess many alluring Accomplishments; they

are often seen in the most Advantageous Point of View, and their Profession instructs them systematically in every meretricious Subtlety and Art that can captivate and subdue the Frailty of our Nature. (18-19)

The idea of the actress as a seducer is echoed in the newspapers, pamphlets, and other print propaganda throughout this period. The Theatrical Inquisitor of 1815 describes the power of the “Muse” who has

beauty that gives being to the poet’s rapturous vision, a voice that guides his language to the heart, smiles that enchant, tears that dissolve us, with looks that fascinate, and dying plaintive tones that sink into the soul, are now the appropriate and exclusive attributes of that all-conquering sex; in short they bind our nobles in chains, and our princes in links—of love.

(93)

Male performers faced similar, though not as harsh, prejudices stemming from villainous roles. As John Brewer describes the period for actors and actresses, “It seemed almost impossible to combine a successful stage career with respectability” (334). Puritan protesters of the theatre projected similar prejudices on the audience as well. Because the actors thrilled spectators with their impropriety and theatre-goers were happy to enjoy such behaviors, the spectators were as sinful as the thespians (334). Objections to the theatre reached beyond those persons employed to the buildings themselves. Drury Lane and Covent Garden were in neighborhoods marked by poverty, violence and crime as well as prostitution. Drury Lane and Covent Garden were especially associated with prostitution. “Drury Lane ague” was the slang term for syphilis (Brewer 348). By 1794,

the Theatrical Guardian pronounced that the Covent Garden had “been made little less than a public brothel” (348).

Faced with all these deep-seeded prejudices against the theatre and actresses, Mary Robinson seemed to be walking into the role of the seductive victimizer. While she enjoyed a prolific acting career, her celebrity destroyed her hopes for respectability at the same time it prolonged her career. She would portray more than twenty-five different character roles on stage. Notorious for her “breeches roles” that she was cast for because of her legs, she attracted particular male approval in her roles as Viola in Twelfth Night and Jacintha in Hoadly’s The Suspicious Husband. None of her roles would elicit male attention or approval like that of Perdita in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale. From a Royal Command performance on December 3, 1779, Robinson would capture the admiration and affections of George, Prince of Wales. As she waited in the green-room before making her appearance on stage, William Smith, the actor portraying Leontes, told her, “By Jove, Mrs. Robinson, you will make a conquest of the Prince; for tonight you look handsomer than ever” (Memoirs 156).

What exactly took place that night at the Drury Lane Theatre differs by account, but what is indisputable is the public affair that resulted from the performance. The affair would lead to the utter detriment of Mary Robinson’s reputation. The Prince and Robinson offer similar accounts of the beginning of their affair. Interestingly, each places the other in the role of the captivator. The Prince in a letter written the very next day describes the night:

I was delighted at the Play last Night, and was extremely moved by two

scenes in it, especially as I was particularly interested in the appearance of the most beautiful Woman, that ever I beheld, who acted with such delicacy that she drew tears from my eyes, she perceived how much of my attention was taken up with her, not only during her acting but when she was behind the Scenes, and contrived every little innocent art to captivate a heart but too susceptible of receiving every impression she attempted to give it.

The Prince's letter exemplifies the widely held presumption of the actress as seductress and places himself as a victim in the captivity of her art. Robinson writes her own account of the evening some twenty years later in her Memoirs. She places herself under the captivating gaze of the Prince:

I hurried through the first scene, not without much embarrassment, owing to the fixed attention with which the Prince of Wales honored me. Indeed, some flattering remarks which were made by his Royal Highness met my ear as I stood near his box, and I was overwhelmed with confusion. The Prince's particular attention was observed by every one, and I was again rallied at the end of the play. On the last curtsy, the royal family condescendingly returned a bow to the performers; but just as the curtain was falling, my eyes met those of the Prince of Wales; and with a look that *I never shall forget*, he gently inclined his head a second time; I felt the compliment, and blushed my gratitude. (157)

The "flattering remarks" that Robinson mentions overwhelmed her with confusion also portray the Prince as the aggressor and place her in a passive, victimized role in the



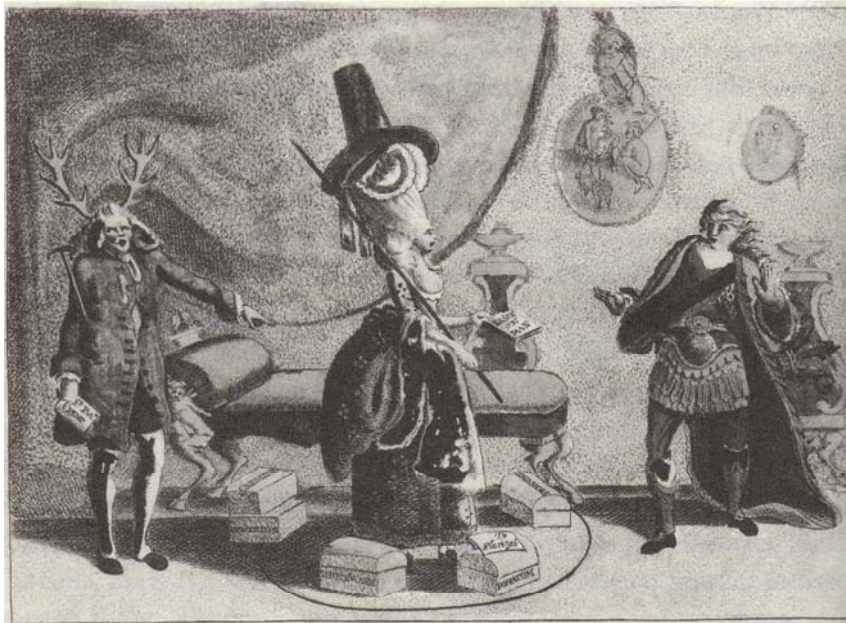
ordeal. Neither wanted to admit an active part in the inception of the liaison but rather claim the designation of unwitting victim. Despite his hesitancy in his narrative to claim responsibility for initiating the affair, the Prince did send numerous anonymous letters by messenger to Robinson. Their yearlong affair began with the two exchanging passionate letters under the pseudonyms of “Perdita” and “Florizel,” the betrothed lovers in The Winter’s Tale, and these letters held a significant place in their relationship. They would become a bartering chip for Robinson when the Prince eventually abandoned her, and satirists of the era would exploit the epistolary relationship to the fullest, whether in the popular prints and political cartoons or written satires, depicting her as an adulterous seducer who victimized the Prince.

Mary Robinson’s victimization by satirical cartoonists coincides with an exploding trade in cheap prints (O’Connell 14). Until this point in the century, any print was a relatively expensive commodity, and the majority of the population had little money to spare for non-essentials (14). In spite of their cost earlier in the century, these prints still held very wide public appeal—pinned on tavern walls or offered for sale in the streets—broadside would have formed a part of the common experience of city life even for those who could not afford to buy them (14). Their themes and subjects included religion, patriotism, crime and execution, phenomena and freaks of nature, drinking and temperance, and marriage and cuckoldry. As a famed actress and now increasingly public courtesan, Mary Robinson was an easy target for the cartoonists and printmakers to exploit for profit.

As the subject of numerous cuckoldry cartoons, she received scathing treatment in the papers, pamphlets, and other print media. The point of view of these cartoons is

“inexorably male” (109), in perfect keeping with the era as described by Sheila O’Connell in her book The Popular Print in England: 1550-1850. In discussing the bias of cartoons of this time period, she mentions that even a rare image of an admirable woman, *A Good Housewife*, includes in the verse accompanying the early-eighteenth-century impression the cynical lines: “Such Wives as this I doubt not but there are; / But like the black Swan they are wondrous rare” (109). While women were often maliciously treated, the husbands in the cuckoldry cartoons are often depicted as condoning their wives’ adultery. In the *Contented Cuckold*, published by John Overton, a husband is shown sorting pieces of jewelry and counting piles of money acquired from his wife’s lovers (O’Connell 112).

In the earliest caricature of the Robinsons and the Prince (Figure 1), these conventions seem to play out. Mary is at the center of the print with a note at her feet labeled “To Florizel.” Behind her, Mr. Robinson is horned and directing the Prince to the chaise lounge beside her. He keeps his eyes peeled to “guard the door” as described in the accompanying text. The Prince, on the other side of the drawing, is depicted in a reserved stance, his hands and arms out in front of him in a defensive position. His weight rests anxiously on his back foot. The accompanying text, lyrics to the tune of “O Polly is a Sad Slut,” portrays the Prince as the “victim,” describing him as a “tender Prince” who had his poor heart stolen away. Mr. Robinson is described as “a puny Imp, / [who] Will often guard the Door, / And humbly play Sir Peter Pimp, / While She performs the Whore.” The lyrics purvey Mary Robinson as an old prostitute who steals the Prince’s heart and plays no other role as well as she does the Whore.



PRICE SIX PENCE  
**FLORIZEL and PERDITA.**

TUNE: *O Polly is a sad Slut! &c.*

*I'LL sing a Song, a merry one,  
 To cheer the doleful Times,  
 And should you like a little Fun,  
 I'll tell it you in Rhimes.*

*A tender Prince, ah well-a-day!  
 Of Years not yet a Score,  
 Had late his poor Heart stol'n away,  
 By one of 's many more;*

*As many more (at least) she is,  
 And might have been the Mother,  
 (You'd say it, if you saw her Phiz)  
 Perhaps of such an other.*

*Her Cheeks were vermeil'd o'er with Red,  
 Her Breast enamell'd White,  
 And nodding Feathers deck'd her Head,  
 A Piece for Candle Light.*

*Sometimes she'd play the Tragic Queen,  
 Sometimes the Peasant poor,  
 Sometimes she'd step behind the Scenes,  
 And there she'd play the W——.*

*Two Thousand Pounds, a princely Sight &  
 For doing just no more,  
 Than what is acted every Night,  
 By every Sister W——.*

*She never play'd her Part so well,  
 In all her Life before,  
 Yet some, as well as Florizel,  
 Knows how she plays the W——.*

*Her Husband too, a puny Imp,  
 Will often guard the Door,  
 And humbly play Sir Peter Pimp,  
 While she performs the W——.*

Figure 1 “Florizel and Perdita”

From the very beginning, the cartoonists cast Robinson in the role of the victimizer and the Prince as her victim.

After several months of love letters, the Prince asked Mary Robinson to come to his private apartment disguised in the boy's clothes that she wore for her breeches role in The Irish Widow. She refused, but they did begin to meet secretly on a regular basis at Kew Palace. In a letter after they met, the Prince offered her a bond of twenty-thousand pounds to be paid at his coming of age, i.e. twenty-one. The practice of making a formal financial offer to an actress or courtesan that a man wanted to keep was common for the period. After their clandestine meetings and the proffered bond, the Prince and Robinson were often seen in public. Now that she had a bond from the Prince, Robinson retired from the stage. Perhaps owing to pressures from the King, the conspicuous couple was separated more abruptly than their liaison had begun, but equally as plausible, the separation was a product of the Prince's fickle affections. The Prince left Robinson for Elizabeth Armistead, a famous courtesan rumored to have been Mary's personal maid at Drury Lane. Their sudden separation and Robinson's ensuing battle with the Prince for financial stability and her affairs with Colonel Banastre Tarleton and Charles Fox only added fodder to a growing frenzy of satirical images. By the mid 1780s Mary Robinson had become a "stock figure" in the print illustrations of London crowd scenes (Flâneuse 166).

In one of the earliest cartoons depicting Robinson as the victim of the Prince's capriciousness, she is treated with a more sympathetic rendering than the cartoons that would follow. James Gillray's *Monuments Lately Discovered on Salisbury Plain* (Figure 2) was published June 15, 1782, shortly after the separation of the Prince and Robinson was complete, and satirizes the Marquis of Salisbury's jealousy of the Prince of Wales's attention to the Marchioness of Salisbury (Wright and Evans 372-3). In the print, the

Marquis and Mary Robinson are shown turning into stone or monuments on the plain famous for Stonehenge. The Marquis, with horns budding from his head, and Robinson are less delineated than the intricate depictions of the Prince and Marchioness who stand hand in hand. Although still in the center of the print compositionally as in the earliest print mentioned above, Mary Robinson is lost in the background and bears less of a blow in this cartoon. Betsy Bolton notes that she is “treated more gently, described as ‘some forlorn Dido, or forsaken Ariadne, of Quality’” in Gillray’s text identifying the figures (737).



Figure 2 Monuments Lately Discovered on Salisbury Plain

A group of revelers to the far left of the print, evocative of Stonehenge, though furthest in the background of the image, compete with the figure of Robinson for the viewer's eye. Being foremost in the composition, the Marquis, although an "unfinished resemblance of the Human Form," commands more attention than Robinson. She fades into obscurity in this image. The cartoon evokes some pathos for the figure of Mary Robinson as she stands turning into stone in a posture that marks surprise and vulnerability while all other figures in the cartoon ignore her.

Any partly sympathetic treatment that the satirists gave Robinson was short-lived. By August 20, 1782 with the publication of Gillray's *The Thunderer* (Figure 3), Gillray's sympathy seemed nonexistent. During the summer of 1782, Mary Robinson had numerous liaisons with several famous men including Charles Fox, Lord Malden, and Banastre Tarleton. By the fall, she had settled with Tarleton. Gillray's cartoon plays on the presumed rivalry between the Prince and Tarleton. In the image, Banastre Tarleton and the Prince stand in front of the Whirligig. Tarleton with sword drawn upstages the Prince, who stands a literal featherhead behind the Colonel. The phallic image of Tarleton's sword contrasts with the limp riding whip of the Prince. In the background, Robinson acts as a sign for the Whirligig. The whirligig was a commonly used punishment for army prostitutes (Mellor 274). Her legs and arms splayed, breast bared, fixed on a signpost, she announces, "This is the Lad I'll kiss most sweet / Who'd not love a soldier?" For Bolton and contemporary readers of the cartoon, the explicit statement of preference for Tarleton that Gillray attributes to Robinson would have transformed her character from one of sympathy to one of moral ineptitude. Her presence atop the



signpost with eyes to look up her skirt “raunchily redefines its promise to serve ‘Alamode Beef, hot every Night,’” as Bolton points out (739).

Modern readers, unlike her contemporaries, may be quicker to read Robinson’s relationships with men of power as necessary means for self-security and self-promotion,



Figure 3 The Thunderer

but whether her relationships are read as immoral or inevitable, they present an interesting representation of power. In *Monuments Lately Discovered on Salisbury Plain*, Robinson, although an obscure figure in the image, serves as the focal point of the reader's pathos, and in *The Thunderer* she gives the rivaling men their sexual prowess despite her position as a background prop. Even though she would appear to most modern readers as victimized by print media, her caricatures often retain unique, implicit, and sometimes even explicit power. In "The Thunderer," the sexual power, with which Robinson allures the Prince and Tarleton, renders her a manipulative whore. Her power is downplayed while the adulterous effects are exaggerated to present her as a victimizer and her lovers as deceived victims. Any power the caricatures give Robinson proves destructive for her character.

In *Perdita & Perdita—or—the Man & Woman of the People* by T. Colley (Figure 4), published December 17, 1782, the power of Robinson is most explicit, but even given outright power in her caricature, the resulting image still portrays her as the manipulative victimizer. Robinson drives Charles Fox in her personal phaeton. The cartoon comments on the relationship of Fox, who helped her get an annuity from the Prince after he left her and refused to honor his bond, and Robinson, who was reported to have had a sexual relationship with Fox. Robinson, notorious for driving her own carriage, drives the phaeton as opposed to Fox who should have by eighteenth-century standards. The image implies that she controlled the relationship, but in spite of the empowering depiction as an independent woman capable of supplanting the man as the alpha-partner, the caption undermines any empowerment. The phrase "woman of the people" held derogatory sexual connotations and plays ironically upon the famous political designation for the





Figure 4 Perdito & Perdita



Figure 5 Florizel and Perdita

Whig Fox as “man of the people” (Femininity 34). In Colley’s print as well as an anonymous caricature of the Prince and Mary from October of 1783 (Figure 5), Mary Robinson is continually defined in juxtaposition to a male counterpart and the dictates of a patriarchic culture.

In the anonymous caricature of 1783 bearing the caption *Florizel and Perdita* (Figure 5), the definition of Robinson through contrast is literal. The print presents only one half each of the Prince and Robinson, and together, they form the resemblance of one person. Together, their heads are also evocative of a heart shape, which would evince the paper heart that the Prince sent along with his miniature portrait through Lord Malden early in the Prince’s wooing of Robinson. On one side was written, “Je ne change qu’en mourant,” and on the other, “Unalterable to my Perdita through life” (Byrne 107). Contemporary readers would have been familiar with the Prince’s gift that Robinson cherished for the rest of her life. She was depicted in many cartoons and portraits with the miniature. At the same time such a heart shape would evoke pathos from the reader, the cartoon casts Mary Robinson as a destructive or disabling force. Behind the Prince, the elder George cries, “Oh! My son, My son,” while the crown floats unattainable. Behind her, Thomas Robinson sits on a pedestal, the King of Cuckolds, while on his horns sit the busts of Tarleton, Fox, and Lord North. The public perception of Mary Robinson as the victimizer of the Prince is reflected in the print. Just the same as the view that Robinson prevents the Prince from fulfilling his father’s expectations, her half-image in the print keeps the Prince from fully “realizing” himself, and yet when Robinson viewed the cartoon, as well as any of the other numerous prints she was depicted in, she may have read the contrary into each image. In the anonymous print of

*Florizel and Perdita*, she may have read the Prince's half-image as obstructing the fulfillment of herself, literally and figuratively. The *Florizel and Perdita* print (Figure 5) illustrates the ambiguity of the victim and victimizer dichotomy. From the "inexorably male" gaze of the satirical cartoonists, Robinson is the victimizer; in Mary Robinson's eyes, she was the victim of their gaze and of circumstances beyond her control.

Robinson began to take control of her circumstances as best she could. During roughly the same time period as many of the scurrilous cartoons, Mary Robinson was also sitting for numerous portraits painted by the leading portrait artists of her day. In the 1780s her private life had enthralled and obsessed the satirical press, while high art portraits of her appeared in several Royal Academy shows (British Sappho 44). Once abandoned by the Prince, Robinson contemplated a return to the stage, and portrait painting offered a means to regain some of her clout. Robyn Asleson notes:

The timing of Robinson's portraits seems to confirm her desire to exploit the propaganda value of such imagery. Her most important portraits were produced not during the peak period of her theatrical career, when she was delighting audiences at Drury Lane and enjoying the attentions of the Prince of Wales, but following her premature retirement from the stage and her humiliating rejection by the prince—when she stood the greatest need of favourable publicity. (8)

After her notorious stage career and the immoral sexual connotations attributed to such an occupation along with her dubious relationships with several men of power, Robinson discovered, as Gill Perry explains, the "high art portrait provided an important means of re-representing or recording the social position of the actress, especially if the painting

was exhibited at the Royal Academy” (Ambiguity 66). A Royal Academy showing would have meant that her portrait was alongside portraits of well-born sitters. Portraits displayed at the Academy, hung in the artists’ studio windows, or engraved copies of the portraits acted as advertising for her future performances, and this enhanced visibility in the public could also help her social aspirations (66). The benefits of painting a famous actress like Mary Robinson rewarded artists as well. The public’s insatiable appetite for visual representations of female stage stars made actresses highly desirable subjects for artists, who were only happy to exploit the magnetic appeal of these beguiling celebrities (Asleson 2). And actresses served as excellent models, well versed in the effective deployment of gesture, facial expression, and costume (2). Mary Robinson was in high demand. She was possibly the most often painted woman of her day, the only other contender for that honor being, not the Queen, but Lady Emma Hart Hamilton, who began her career as a professional courtesan (Mellor 278). Robinson could use the demand for her image to her advantage by sitting for portraits to combat the licentious depictions of herself in the satirical prints.

She first sat for George Romney two weeks before the Prince had called off the affair. The portrait (Figure 6) remained with Romney and appeared in the artist’s sale after his death, suggesting that, rather than being paid for, it was undertaken as a mutual publicity deal: Robinson would have the honor of sitting for her portrait in the true manner of an aristocrat, while Romney would get to hang the canvas in his studio as a revelation of his art (Byrne 154). The painting depicts Robinson in the habit of a Quaker or a widow, or as Anne K. Mellor describes her, she is a “woman of sincere convictions fated to survive without love” (288). Her hair, bosom, and hands are covered, and she

appears as an older woman with skin still pure white and with cheeks still blushed with innocence (288). Ironically, as she sat for a portrait that depicted her as an innocent



Figure 6 Mary Robinson by George Romney, 1781

victim, she was also being exploited by Romney. No doubt her image would garner huge publicity for Romney. In 1820, the painter Benjamin Robert Hayden displayed his *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem* that featured William Wordsworth's face as part of the crowd. Hayden sold tickets for admission to view the painting, and from March until November 30,948 people paid a shilling to see the painting; of those spectators 8,519 also purchased a sixpenny catalogue that identified the biblical figures in the painting and their models (Romantic Theatricality 211). Shortly after she began sitting for Romney, Robinson also began sitting for Thomas Gainsborough. The portrait (Figure 7) that Gainsborough painted of Robinson is perhaps the most well known of her portraits. Originally intended for the Royal Academy show of 1782, the portrait was pulled from the show (Ambiguity 66). Some debate whether the portrait was commissioned by the Prince. Indisputable is that when finished the portrait would eventually hang in the Prince's gallery at Carlton House (Byrne 155). M. J. Levy convincingly argues that the portrait was begun, and perhaps even commissioned, ten months after the affair was ended, but Paula Byrne also posits that, although the first known reference to sittings does not appear until August 1781, the commission could have been from earlier in the year during their affair. She also argues that the August sittings may not have been the first. The dating of the painting is important for modern scholars because it may influence how they interpret the portrait.

M. J. Levy reads the painting as a portrait of Mary Robinson after the affair. He writes that it seems feasible to argue Gainsborough's portrait, "rather than being a depiction of her during her love affair, is in fact a portrait of her after it has ended; and that its purpose is to rebuke the Prince for his failure to honour his obligations. . . [t]he



miniature functions as a kind of forceful reminder” (Levy 154). Levy points to several key features in the portrait to support this interpretation of the painting. The miniature that she holds in the painting, Levy reasons, “is almost certainly meant to represent the Prince” (Levy 153). The miniature representing the Prince is in fact the one point on which all interpretations can agree. Levy argues that the placement of the miniature in



Figure 7 Mary Robinson by Thomas Gainsborough, 1782

the portrait says, “Here is the pledge of your eternal love; where are your promises?” (Levy 154).

For Anne K. Mellor, the miniature holds no sympathetic symbolism. Mellor argues that Gainsborough’s portrait is a subtle criticism of Mary Robinson. She suggests that “by flaunting this miniature, a traditional emblem of fidelity, Gainsborough’s *Perdita* implicitly claims to have ‘possessed’ the young Prince” (278). Mellor’s interpretation of the miniature illustrates the obscurity of the victim/victimizer dichotomy as it relates to Mary Robinson. Robinson’s “possession” of the Prince’s heart, now left with only a miniature, could be read as sympathetic image. Robinson still clings to the only thing she has left as she sits with a dog, also a traditional symbol of fidelity. To back her claim, Mellor reads numerous other subtleties in the portrait as suggesting a morally debased sexuality. Her half-closed eyes in the calculating gaze of a coquette, her tawny yellow skin tone suggesting a stereotyped “eastern” or Oriental licentiousness, her seemingly swinging foot beckoning seductively, and her right hand that holds a fluffy, fuzzy gauze handkerchief—a simulacrum for the pubic hair which it strategically covers—all point up the immorality of the portrait in Mellor’s interpretation. Most suggestive for Mellor is the panting Pomeranian. She writes, “The faithful dog beside her, whose panting tongue is exactly the same color as *Perdita*’s own, subtly implies her bestial sexuality” (278).

In addition to the dog, Mellor reads the rural setting of the portrait as emblematic of the same sexuality. In Mellor’s interpretation, the snaking vine coiling among the fig leaves on the lower right of the portrait reinforces the uncivilized or immoral sexual desire of Mary Robinson. Her reasoning contrasts with Levy and others who view the setting that Gainsborough employs in the painting as ennobling. Gill Perry notices that



“Gainsborough’s full-length portrait within a landscape was a format regularly deployed for portraits of both aristocratic and more ‘ordinary’ female subjects of the 1770s and 1780s” (Ambiguity 66). Gainsborough represented Robinson in elegant dress, posed gracefully against nature—conventions which placed the work within a category of carefully coded aristocratic commissions (66). The variability of interpretations for Mary Robinson’s portraits highlights an intriguing aspect of her attempt to shift her public perception as victimizer to victim. The dubious representations of Robinson, as illustrated with Gainsborough’s portrait, hint at a male hegemony uncertain about female sexuality. Perhaps this ambivalence should be expected since Robinson, in coming to the Academy artists, turns to the very culture that first cultivated her victimizer persona. Faced with the fastidious depictions of the satirical broadsides, the fictive conventions of portraiture must have seemed a redemptive option for Mary Robinson.

Painting Robinson using the conventions common to the portraits of the aristocracy was just one way in which the portrait artists could recuperate her image. Also common to the conventions of female portraiture of the era was the practice of using mythical or literary identities for the representation of women. Gainsborough uses this technique as well. Most scholars agree that the painting is meant to represent her as Perdita, one of her more flattering characters, if nothing else her most popular. In his article discussing the historic identity of Sappho often associated with Robinson, Gill Perry explains that “Robinson’s claims for social status depended to a large extent on her public transformation into symbolic, historical, literary or mythological roles” (British Sappho 47).

Mellor acknowledges the use of these conventions, but she also stresses, similar to Perry, that these conventions often times did not work or were even contradictory. She calls attention to Sir Joshua Reynolds first portrait of Robinson (Figure 8) to illustrate



Figure 8 Mary Robinson by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1782

such contradictory messages. Reynolds depicts her in the pose and seventeenth-century costume frequently used by dispossessed or alienated family members (Mellor 280). Mellor believes Reynolds' portrait is an attempt to establish a respectable lineage, but at the same time her costume along with her half-closed, calculating eyes and slightly pursed lips are a reminder of Mary Robinson's domestic infidelity (281).



Figure 9 Mary Robinson by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1784

In his second, more sympathetic portrait painted in 1784 (Figure 9), Reynolds most effectively evokes pathos for the “lost one,” Perdita. The portrait, more convincingly than any other, depicts her as the victim. Mellor echoes this sentiment, describing Robinson in the portrait as “the abandoned woman, filled with melancholy, gazing with sorrow upon a tempestuous sea and dark, stormy sky, at a horizon where the sun sinks and no ships appear” (283). The conventional pose of the turned-away head that Reynolds uses in the portrait is known in the nineteenth-century painting trade as a “lost profile” (284). The image is one reminiscent, somewhat ironically, of Gillray’s satirical depiction of Robinson as “some forlorn Dido, or forsaken Ariadne” in *Monuments Lately Discovered on Salisbury Plain* (Figure 2). She is an eighteenth-century Ariadne, confined upon a rock, waiting for a lover who never comes (Mellor 284). Reynolds’ portrait evokes empathy from its viewers without any conflicting details, unlike the mixed emotions of Gillray’s cartoon.

Mary Robinson’s portraits would lead to a brief return to the stage, cut short by her continually deteriorating health. More significantly, the images would spark some positive reactions to her life and career. The sympathetic portrait by Reynolds in 1784 would help shape the reflective, brooding, melancholic portraits of Robinson by George Englehart and Thomas Lawrence, and their sympathetic view of Robinson was adopted by many of her later biographers (284). What formed from their empathy was a representation of Mary Robinson as a victim of love and fate. All of these images, satirical and high art together, must have exerted some influence on Mary Robinson and her artistic endeavors also, and in many ways the sympathetic depiction sparked by Reynolds and similar artists is closest to what she would create for herself in her writing.

It hardly seems believable that a woman so acutely conscious of self-presentation would have surrendered control of her image to someone else, i.e. the painter, but Robinson took full advantage of the commoditization of her image and used it to create a role that attempted to exonerate her infidelity. As a victim of her star-crossed love affair, she could exact the pathos of the public as opposed to its judgment. From circumstances that should have shattered the entirety of her reputation, Mary Robinson manages to salvage a shard of humanity and uses it to reflect the inhumanity of her persecutors into their own eyes. Instead of being totally crushed by the culture, she survives and seems the stronger for surviving than for never being victimized. Mary Robinson seemingly turns her infidelities into an ennobling trait, and she refines this sympathetic representation of herself and of other fallen, neglected, or “unaristocratic” persons in her writing. As a writer apart from the visual artist’s direction, she sought to shape her image and mold the minds of her readers as she pleased.

In a cartoon from 1784 (the same year as Reynolds’ sympathetic portrait) bearing the caption, “Perdita Upon her Last Legs,” that Judith Pascoe describes as a “material figuration of what was for Robinson a constant, low-grade anxiety,” Mary Robinson is depicted as a beggar soliciting money from the Prince (Flâneuse 169). The cartoon (Figure 10) is a commentary on Robinson’s financial reliance on the Prince. Robinson, dressed in tattered clothes, stoops in front of the Prince who hands her a pouch of money. Beside them, a wall displays play-bills advertising her former roles. The image embodies the apotheosis of the victimization of Mary Robinson. At the same time the caricature recalls images of the “slighted maiden” from “Letter to a Friend on Leaving Town,” the print points her forward to the pathetic victim in her future writing. While the print

satirizes her tenuous social status, there is some potential pathos for the ostracized actress. Mary Robinson, the emerging Romantic poet, will harness the sympathy of this image evoked in the subversive innocence of herself, the juxtaposition of the Prince's excesses and Robinson's exigence, and the pathos of the "tragedy" of a fallen celebrity. Using these traits and others from her representation in satirical cartoons and high-art portraits, Mary Robinson endeavors to create a more authentic idea of victimization that reflects the reality of her eighteenth-century world.





Figure 10 “Perdita Upon her Last Legs,” 1784

### CHAPTER 3

#### IN THE SHADOW OF REPUTATION

Often lost amongst the melodrama of Mary Robinson's life is the quality of her writing and the influence she held with other first-generation Romantic poets. Since her "rediscovery," Robinson's relationships with other Romantics have been explored, and her writing is now working its way back into the canon of first-generation Romantic literature. To rediscover Mary Robinson long after the likes of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey seems ironic when considering their relative popularity during their active writing careers. As Stuart Curran has argued, Mary Robinson was by far the best known of the four poets (19). Curran points out the great faith Longman and Rees placed in Robinson's Lyrical Tales in that they paid sixty-three pounds for a press run of 1,250 copies, "which in both categories signifies very respectable numbers" (19). But as some scholars have countered, these numbers can be misleading. Mary Robinson's notoriety was already firmly established by means of her acting career and affair with the Prince, so her publication success could have been a result of the public's curiosity. The numbers, for some, strictly represent notoriety not esteem. The debate embodies one of the many ambiguities in the study of Mary Robinson's career. Certainly, both sides present valid arguments, but the danger for academicians lies in subscribing to one or the other. Chalking her success up to notoriety negates any talent she might have possessed, and ignoring the role her popularity played in her reception exudes naivety. More likely, Mary Robinson, the astute actress and artist, contributed to her own success as a writer, deliberately taking advantage of her notoriety, both in its perquisites, such as an instant readership, and in the inspiration and influence it exerted over her artistic vision. Writing



in response to her multifarious visual representations to combat and reshape her reputation, Mary Robinson continually shifts her authorial stance, testing and refining perspectives that best suit her poetic ambitions. Besides propagandizing her writing, Robinson's reputation as an actress and courtesan also complicated the reception of her work at the same time. Her writing was received with the same stigma as her dubious stage career and adulterous relationships. Paradoxically, her notoriety jumpstarted her career yet ultimately hampered her positive reception in her lifetime and for some many years there after. While Robinson ingeniously wrote to change the public's perception of her as a victimizer to a more flattering perception as a victim, her ambition could not completely outrun the reach of her reputation.

In her article "Selling One's Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Marketing of Poetry," Jacqueline M. Labbe proposes that the central metaphor in Mary Robinson's "London's Summer Morning" is a "picture of the needy female poet as prostitute," and

because of Robinson's public persona as "Perdita," once the Prince of Wales's lover and now a popular figure of the demimonde, this image takes on a greater currency (so to speak). Writing . . . to make money—here to replace a bond from the Prince that is never paid—Robinson trades on her image as a "lost woman" to make her poetry more compelling. (70)

As Labbe presents Robinson's reception, Mary Robinson cashes in on her notoriety, but Labbe also goes on to argue that Robinson's marketing of the victim image is more than a financial decision. Labbe argues that "both Smith and Robinson take advantage of their position as women in a society that expects certain behaviors out of women and men;

they exploit . . . [and] lay bare the idea that women need men's protection for survival" (68). Labbe's argument highlights one of the ultimate results of Mary Robinson's persona as victim in that she extends the poetics of victimization beyond her own image. Robinson examines exploitation in the political sphere, in a poem like "The Poor, Singing Dame," and in the ethnic sphere, in a poem like "The Lascar."

While her popularity as an actress delivered Robinson, as a writer, an instant readership, it also endowed her with a certain amount of poetic license to create a new public image. Much as she responded to the satirical cartoons by sitting for portraits, Mary Robinson turned to her writing to further combat the sardonic images. Unlike the portraits, Mary Robinson's writing provided a greater potential for revision. In changing the ways in which readers view the disenfranchised, she virtually reinvents herself. The trope of victimization that Robinson creates allows her to legitimize her actions and validate her own victimization. Likewise, Robinson's creation helped shape the landscape of Romanticism. As Robin L. Miskolcze proposes, "Robinson's exiles and fugitives embody many of the contradictions present in Robinson's late eighteenth-century world and provide historically and artistically valuable representations of the earlier Romantic movement itself" (207). More so than any other such characters created by her more revered Romantic counterparts, Mary Robinson's victims better represent the men and women of her day. This idea can be illustrated in a close reading of the poem, "The Poor, Singing Dame" and its poetical counterpart, William Wordsworth's "Goody Blake and Harry Gill."

Mary Robinson's "The Poor, Singing Dame" resembles the satirical cartoons, such as "Perdita Upon her Last Legs" (Figure 10), in that they both use the juxtaposition

of antithetical images and ideas to elicit a particular response. In the poem, Robinson contrasts in close proximity, literally, the Poor, Singing Dame and her “neat little Hovel” and the Lord of an old Castle and its “rich chambers.” Mary Robinson delineates her characters through the depiction of the different homes of the characters. Though the hovel has “no charms to allure,” Robinson describes the hut in terms that align it with nature. The hovel rests “beneath an old wall, that went round an old Castle, / For many a year, with brown ivy o’erspread” (2); and Robinson situates the Old Dame’s home beside a river that, when the tempest would roar, “flow’d swiftly beside the green step of its door” (8). The green of the step and the “ivy-bound hedge” create an association with nature through color, but they are not the only visual connections between the hovel and nature. Robinson also describes how the summer sun gilds the “rushy-roof” and “the bright dewes bespangled its ivy-bound hedge” (10). The descriptions not only align the hut with nature, through the sun and dew, but they evoke the gold and silver and jewels that one would expect to be associated with the Lord and his castle. No such “bespangled” descriptions of the castle appear in the poem. Instead, Robinson only describes the “Castle’s rich chambers” as “haunted” and “dreary” (13). Unlike the greens and browns that continually appear in the descriptions of the hovel, the only color that Robinson mentions in describing the castle is the black of the turrets. As opposed to an association with nature, the castle is repeatedly aligned with empty revelry. The great hall resounds with revelry, but the Lord of the castle looks down on the Poor, Singing Dame with envy. The “prodigal chear” of the Lord and his guests contrasts dimly with the merry singing of the Dame (32). In the poem, “sweet Birds” chant all around the hovel, and the Poor, Singing Dame repeats her old song undaunted, even through the

winter. After the Singing Dame dies, the only birds who sing are the screech-owls who follow the Lord of the castle “hooting a terrible song” (54).

By her juxtaposition of the Lord and the Dame, Mary Robinson elicits a pointed response from her readers. The Dame, aligned with nature until she becomes a point of natural innocence, evokes more sympathy from readers by the close contrast with the Lord, allied with all that is corrupted in mankind, than she would have had Mary Robinson focused exclusively on the Dame’s story. In the disparity of the antithetical images of the Poor, Singing Dame and the Lord of the castle, Robinson creates the emphatic pathos readers feel for the Dame. Robinson conscientiously presents the Dame to her readers in a state of total innocence compared to the Lord of the castle. Unlike in “Perdita Upon her Last Legs,” where the caricature of Mary Robinson comes loaded with connotations of her infidelity and impropriety, the Poor, Singing Dame exhibits no conflicting characteristics to interfere with the pathos of readers. Sympathy for the Dame takes on a natural stance in the poem. She is taken down the “green path” to be laid beneath the ground where the primroses pale and long grasses grow (43). The “bright dewes of twilight” bespangle her grave, and nature, including inanimate objects that fill the world, takes on a sympathetic personification (46). The death-bell mournfully sounds and the “fresh flow’rets” in sympathy wave (48). Though teeming with sensibility, Mary Robinson’s presentation of her supremely innocent character still holds integrity because of her manipulation of her readers’ empathy. She deftly balances the exaggeration of the Poor, Singing Dame’s innocence, to maximize pathos from her reader, with the torment of the Lord of the castle. The sensational image of the ever-pursuing screech-owls creates an intriguing objective correlative for the mental anguish that the Lord of the

castle may have suffered for the guilt of the Poor, Singing Dame's undeserved death. Robinson's presentation of the Dame targets her readers' empathies on the aristocratic exploitation of the poor, a political focus different from that of the ballad upon which it was based.

Robinson's "The Poor, Singing Dame" is modeled on the most popular of Wordsworth's 1798 ballads, "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" (Abrams 92). Wordsworth's epigraph for the poem is "A True Story," and he writes in his advertisement to Lyrical Ballads that "the Tale of Goody Blake and Harry Gill is founded on a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire" (739). Writing in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, he explains that he "wished to draw attention to the truth that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous. The truth is an important one; the fact (for it is a *fact*) is a valuable illustration of it" (757). The "truth" that Wordsworth wanted to draw attention to was a condition Erasmus Darwin outlined in his book, Zoonomia, or the Laws of Organic Life. Darwin describes *Mania mutabilis*, or "Mutable madness" as a condition "where the patients are liable to mistake ideas of sensation for those from irritation, that is, imaginations for realities" (305). Darwin relates a case of *Mania mutabilis* in his book that very likely formed the basis of Wordsworth's ballad. Scholars have discovered that Wordsworth wrote to Joseph Cottle for a copy of Zoonomia (Butler and Green 344). The case Darwin relates in the book is a nearly identical narrative to that of Wordsworth's ballad. Darwin claims he "received good information of the truth of the following case, which was published a few years ago in the newspapers" (Zoonomia 307). Darwin's account continues as follows:

A young farmer in Warwickshire, finding his hedges broke, and the sticks carried away during a frosty season, determined to watch for the thief. He lay many cold hours under a haystack, and at length an old woman, like a witch in a play, approached, and began to pull up the hedge; he waited till she had tied up her bundle of sticks, and was carrying them off, that he might convict her of the theft, and then springing from his concealment, he seized his prey with violent threats. After some altercation, in which her load was left upon the ground, she kneeled upon her bundle of sticks, and raising her arms to Heaven beneath the bright moon then at the full, spoke to the farmer already shivering with cold, "Heaven grant, that thou never mayest know again the blessing to be warm." He complained of cold all the next day, and wore an upper coat, and in a few days another, and in a fortnight took to his bed, always saying nothing made him warm, he covered himself with very many blankets, and had a sieve over his face, as he lay; and from this one insane idea he kept his bed above twenty years for fear of the cold air, till at length he died. (307-8)

Wordsworth varies little of the narrative in his ballad from Darwin's, probably a testament to his serious attempt at the "factualness" of the event, but despite all his effort to ensure the veracity of the ballad, Goody Blake lacks the realistic humanity of Robinson's "Poor, Singing Dame."

Much of the disparity in the two characters exists in Robinson's and Wordsworth's presentation of their respective characters and the poets' intended truths. Mary Robinson's Poor, Singing Dame evinces much empathy from readers because she

unflinchingly and contentedly lives in a world of meager amenities that in the end only brings her unjustified torment, sorrow, and death. Goody Blake, on the other hand, though she lives in substantially poorer conditions than that of the Poor, Singing Dame, exacts immediate revenge on Harry Gill. Rather than dying an existential “martyr” like the Poor, Singing Dame and the untold generations of peasant farmers and their families who lived and died much the same, Goody Blake curses Harry Gill to death by cold. Mary Robinson has rewritten the victim that she sees in Wordsworth’s ballad, just as she does with the victim of the satirical prints, and all the while, she uses the rhetoric of the cartoons to her advantage. Like the cartoonists, Robinson exaggerates the distress of her victim to the outer limits of believability, always mindful to retain some fundamental core of truth, recognizable to her readers. The satirical broadsides successfully captivated their audiences because they always contained some truth to which a merchant, sailor, barkeep, or spinster could relate. In identifying this truth, the audiences of the broadsides found the humor of the print. In a print such as “Perdito & Perdita” (Figure 4), anyone living in London would readily recognize the truth in Colley’s print depicting Mary Robinson driving her own phaeton, an act for which she was notorious. Londoners might have more easily accepted Colley’s insinuations on Robinson’s relationship with Fox as a result. Likewise in Robinson’s poem, identifying with and relating the political truth of the disparity of the classes, the Poor, Singing Dame evokes empathy from the reader, much more so than Wordsworth’s Goody Blake. In his exploration of the human psyche, Wordsworth aims to draw his readers’ attention to a psychological state, and as a result, he distances his characters from his readers’ sympathies.

Also similar to the cartoonists and in contrast to Wordsworth's ballad, Robinson does not allow her victim any retaliation or vindication. Mary Robinson purposefully directs all of her reader's empathy to the Poor, Singing Dame. In Wordsworth's ballad focused on an aloof, intangible mental state, the reader's pathos is split between Harry Gill and Goody Blake. While Harry is unsympathetic towards Goody Blake, his plight might excite the empathy of some readers, and while her poverty gives rise to some pathos, Goody Blake's revenge does negate much of the sympathy that readers feel for her. Unlike Wordsworth's ballad, Robinson's poem does not divide the reader's sympathies, but rather directs them quite pointedly. Despite dying in the poem, the Lord of the castle still does not evoke sympathy from readers, as Harry Gill in Wordsworth's ballad may, because Robinson continues to point all pathos to the Poor, Singing Dame:

His bones began wasting, his flesh was decaying,  
And he hung his proud head, and he perish'd with shame;  
And the tomb of rich marble, no soft tear displaying,  
O'ershadows the grave, of THE POOR SINGING DAME! (57-64)

Robinson places the death of the Poor, Singing Dame squarely on the hands of the Lord when screech-owls surround him each night "from that fatal moment / When poor Singing MARY was laid in her grave" (49-50). He remains proud even until he hangs his head in death, but he dies with shame. Robinson takes pains to mention that "no soft tear" was displayed at the Lord's "tomb of rich marble" that still forces the Poor, Singing Dame into the background, and Robinson brings this to the forefront of her readers' minds by making it the last image in the poem (63).



Mary Robinson refers to the Poor, Singing Dame throughout the poem simply by her title description until the dame is buried. Robinson writes, “poor Singing MARY was laid in her grave” (50). Much has been made of Robinson’s decision to identify the Poor, Singing Dame as “MARY.” Some read the poem as Robinson’s poetic commentary on her relationship with the Prince. Obviously in such a reading, the Lord of the castle is read as the Prince and Poor, Singing Mary as Robinson. Reading the poem this way may have been effective for Robinson in her time in terms of financial success, keeping in mind Labbe’s assessment of Robinson’s trading “on her image as a ‘lost woman’ to make her poetry more compelling.” But her decision to identify the Poor, Singing Dame as “Mary” reveals the intentions of an inventive poet, again revealing the dangers of an oversimplified reading of Robinson’s poetry. Setting up her Poor, Singing Dame as a truthful, empathetic character that any reader, especially those in the lower and middle classes, could identify with, Mary Robinson relates her position as a “lost woman” to her readers’ lives. While Robinson ennobles the everyman and everywoman, she also aligns herself with their ennobled position. The ambitiousness of this poetic accomplishment reveals itself when one remembers that it was this same working class who largely subscribed to the message of the satirical broadsides that portrayed Mary Robinson as the adulterous whore who victimized the Prince and countless other men of notoriety. In “The Poor, Singing Dame,” Robinson not only rewrites herself into the role of the victim; she also aggrandizes her fallen social station while she allies her position with the same social classes that vilified her before. Despite this ingenious move, the foresight of Mary Robinson’s poetics of victimization encounters a problem in that she underestimates the influence of her reputation. The same reputation that piqued her readers’ curiosities also

skewed her readers' interpretations of her poetry. Though Mary Robinson creates a simple but viable character in the Poor, Singing Dame that delivers an accurate depiction of the woman's position in the eighteenth-century, defined only in relation to her patriarchal other, her readers more likely than not could not read past the immorality of Robinson's public life to fully appreciate the victim she creates in the Dame.

The relationship between these two poems brings into question the relationship between the poets as well. Scholars have only just begun to investigate what personal relationship Wordsworth and Robinson shared. The proximity in titles for their collections and publication dates immediately stands out. One month before the publication of the second edition of Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems, Mary Robinson's Lyrical Tales was published by the same press of Biggs and Cottle (Curran 17).

Wordsworth attempted without success to have his title changed to Poems in Two Volumes. To fill in the blanks in this intriguing relationship would shed light on not only the poets but the genre as well, and scholars such as Adriana Craciun, in "Mary Robinson, the Monthly Magazine, and the Free Press," and Betsy Bolton, in "Romancing the Stone: 'Perdita' Robinson in Wordsworth's London," have begun the arduous task. The relationship between Robinson and Wordsworth's publishing habits illuminates some of the workings behind Robinson's victim. Primarily publishing in newspapers, Mary Robinson's audience, much like a theatre audience, would lend itself to "theatric" presentation. Judith Pascoe argues for a theatricality of self-presentation in all of Robinson's poetry, and like Labbe, she writes that "Robinson's theatrical self-fashioning was the result of both artistic and financial imperatives" (Robinson and Literary Marketplace 253). The artistic imperatives for Robinson's victim would allow her to

move herself from the role of the victimizer to the role of the victim, while also refashioning the public perception of the victim. Wordsworth, as Pascoe describes him, “constructs an ideal audience for his poetry in his ‘Preface’ to the Lyrical Ballads” (Robinson and Literary Marketplace 253). By shaping his audience, Wordsworth necessarily determines the reception of his poems as opposed to Robinson, who writes for anything but a homogenous audience. Herein lays Robinson’s underestimation of her reputation in her revision of the victim. Mary Robinson could only hope that her heterogeneous audience responded uniformly and with an open mind to her poetry. The result of Robinson’s dilemma emerges in her relationship with another prolific Romantic.

Closely linked to Robinson’s affiliation with newspaper publication, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his relationship with Robinson has been more thoroughly investigated and delineated than that of Robinson and Wordsworth. Their interactions reveal the great degree of influence that Mary Robinson’s reputation exerted over her portrayal of the victim and point to irresolvable conflicts in that portrayal. Though it is impossible to pinpoint when exactly Coleridge and Robinson met, Earl Leslie Griggs, having compiled the collected letters of Coleridge, places their meeting sometime in early 1800 between Coleridge’s departure from Nether Stowey and his arrival at Grasmere based on his correspondence during that time (91). As Eugene Stelzig has pointed out, both would have been aware of each other as contributors to Daniel Stuart’s Morning Post (118). In discussing their contributions to the newspaper, Judith Hawley mentions that on April 17, 1798 the editor announced that “The Poetry of the Morning Post will in future be more critically select. None but first rate compositions will be admitted to our columns; and we are promised the aid of several of the most distinguished writers of the

present day” (64). Of the “distinguished writers of the present day,” perhaps no one was more written or talked about than Mary Robinson. Questioning how one should weigh the relative importance of each contributor at the time and in the annals of history, Hawley lists the “most important” in alphabetical order: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Robinson, Robert Southey, and William Wordsworth, but Hawley also references Stuart Curran’s argument that Robinson was “by far the best known of these poets” and the fact that she was the first poetic correspondent to be hired by the Morning Post in November 1797 because of her established reputation as a poet (65). Though perhaps partially owing to her popularity as a member of the demimonde, Mary Robinson’s writing by this point had established some recognition for herself. At the time of their meeting, Coleridge and Robinson also shared a reputation of being Jacobin writers (Vargo 134). The poets are lambasted in James Gillray’s 1798 cartoon for the Anti-Jacobin, “The New Morality” (Figure 11a). In the cartoon, Coleridge and Robert Southey are portrayed as asses, their friends Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd as a toad and a frog, and Mary Robinson’s Walsingham as one of the “fruits” of the “Cornucopia of Ignorance” that Southey and Coleridge flank (Vargo 134). Interestingly, Coleridge’s relationship with Robinson transformed over the years from the image (Figure 11b) of Coleridge as an ass intrigued by Mary Robinson’s “fruit of ignorance,” Walsingham, into a much more flattering misnomer as a major Romantic influence towering over Robinson.



Figure 11a. "The New Morality." James Gillray. Anti-Jacobin. 1798.



Figure 11b. Detail from “The New Morality.” James Gillray. Anti-Jacobin. 1798.

In modern criticism until as recently as the 1990s, most critics and biographers considered Samuel Taylor Coleridge as Mary Robinson’s advocate and mentor. Judith Hawley traces this modern view of Mary Robinson as a “footnote to the career of the great Romantic” back to the impression given by a frequently quoted letter to Robinson’s daughter in 1802, in which Coleridge describes himself as “the Defender, Apologist, and Encomiast” of her mother, Mary Robinson (62). Lisa Vargo acknowledges this “one-sided” characterization of the literary benefit between Coleridge and Robinson throughout history, but she also raises the question of whether their dialogic relationship should preclude mutual influence (134). Scholarship has revealed that Coleridge sent Robinson his manuscript for “Kubla Khan” (1797), to which she responded with her poem, “To the Poet Coleridge” (1800). But more interesting in terms of influence on

Robinson's portrayal of the victim, the "Snow-Drop" poems of Coleridge and Robinson illustrate, like those of Wordsworth and Robinson, the paradoxical nature of Robinson's poetics of victimization.

Mary Robinson's "Ode to the Snow-Drop" from her novel Walsingham was published in the Morning Post on December 26, 1797, almost three years before the November 20, 1800 publication of "The Poor, Singing Dame" in her Lyrical Tales. Eugene Stelzig notes that "Ode to the Snow-Drop" "conveys a sentimental parallel between the speaker and the author as beautiful but vulnerable flowers" (118). Coleridge must have noticed this "sentimental parallel" also. He published a poetic response entitled "The Apotheosis, or the Snow-Drop" in the Morning Post on January 3, 1798, the same year Gillray would blast both poets in the Anti-Jacobin. Robinson's "Ode to the Snow-Drop" and Coleridge's "Apotheosis" push "more explicitly the suggestion that the sexual sin which lies beneath Robinson's fame may be redeemed through a public display of male benevolence," according to Lisa Vargo (135). Surprisingly, Robinson did not shirk from the idea of a redemptive male "gaze." Much like her redemptive high portrait campaign where she petitions the painters of the very society that cast her in the role of princely victimizer, Mary Robinson's poetic dialogue with Coleridge invites the authoritative male gaze. She went on to exchange a total of six poems with Coleridge between 1797 and 1800 (Stelzig 118). For some time, critics had, to a large extent, dismissed their relationship as being "merely sexual" (Vargo 134). Scholars have touted their relationship as "poetic flirtation," and as recently as 2004, Eugene Stelzig dubbed Coleridge's verse response to Robinson as "in fact more a Della Cruscan erotic compliment than eulogy" (118). The accuracy of Stelzig's comment aside, their

relationship reveals how Robinson's redemption of the victim precariously depends on the empathy of the victimizing society.

As in "The Poor, Singing Dame," Mary Robinson evokes empathy from her readers throughout "Ode to the Snow-Drop" in passages like these:

All weak and wan, with head inclin'd,  
Its parent-breast the drifted snow,  
It trembles, while the ruthless wind  
Bends its slim form; the tempest lowers,  
Its em'rald eye drops crystal show'rs  
On its cold bed below. (7-12)

The first flower to bloom in spring when snow still covers the ground, the snow-drop's frailty in a merciless environment makes for an easily empathetic image, and the parallels to Robinson's own life seem limitless. In a line like, "The night-breeze tears thy silky dress," the image calls to mind the sullied reputation of Robinson with evocative language. Jacqueline Labbe explains that the imagery made her poems immensely popular because

their pathos [is] enhanced by Robinson's strategic self-placement as a bereaved woman made all the more attractive by her very bereavement: identifying herself with graceful and pretty images like snowdrops, she encourages her audience's voracious curiosity about her real-life person and appearance and her scandalous yet fascinating lifestyle. (70)

The pathetic imagery that encourages a public "curiosity about her real-life person" also reveals the fundamental element of Robinson's revision of the victim. Her presentation



of victims in her poetry and her self-presentation in her Memoirs depend on the chivalric and social mores that have created the language of victimization that she attempts to revise. Labbe notices that the characterization of women in Robinson's Memoirs "exaggerates and emphasizes her need for protection and shelter from men and reiterates the self-display in the poems that makes her an attractive damsel in distress" (70).

Robinson's "Ode to the Snow-Drop" evinces this same need for protection, and Coleridge's "Apotheosis" provides the shelter that the "Snow-Drop" seeks. In his opening lines, Coleridge boldly asserts, "FEAR no more, thou timid flower! / Fear thou no more the Winter's might" (346). More than calming fear, Coleridge responds to the "marginalization," as Lisa Vargo calls it, of Mary Robinson and her reputation (135). In "Ode to the Snow-Drop," Robinson depicts the ostracized snow-drop in a violent, unforgiving environment of "ruthless" winds "amidst the bare and chilling gloom" (5, 9). Coleridge in his gesture of "male benevolence" places Robinson, the poet, and her snow-drop in Pieria, the reputed home of the muses:

FAME unrebelling heard the charm,  
And bore thee to Pierian climes.  
Fear thou no more the matin frost  
That sparkled on thy bed of snow:  
For there, mid laurels ever green,  
Immortal thou shalt blow. (374-5)

Coleridge's passage depicts Robinson not as a battered, marginalized character, but instead as a poet with the immortality of fame. In his final lines after lifting her to fantastic heights, Coleridge gently lowers Robinson back to the reality of her station:

The LOVES trip round her all the night;  
And PITY hates the morning's birth,  
That rudely warns the ling'ring SPRITE  
Whose plumes must waft her back to earth!  
Meek PITY, that foreruns relief,  
Yet still assumes the hues of woe;  
Pale promiser of rosy Spring,  
A SNOW-DROP mid the snow. (376)

The "LOVES" of Coleridge's final lines allude to Mary Robinson's "career of sexual scandal" (Stlezig 119). While Coleridge's treatment of Robinson's "LOVES" in the final passage evokes a sympathetic tone, the passage also reminds readers of the relentlessness of reputation as well as the importance of redemption. "PITY" despises the sunrise because it brings with it the daily renewal of a judgmental world, and though pity "foreruns relief," woe necessarily accompanies the pair. The bittersweet edge of Coleridge's pity points to the tension inherent in Robinson's victimization. Without the sympathy of the society that ostracized her, Robinson cannot redeem her reputation. She seeks the aid of painters like Reynolds to refashion her image, and she writes to evoke the chivalric pathos of her readers. Labbe describes Robinson's decision to rely on her audience's sense of chivalry, writing, "She [Robinson] walks a risky and narrow path in so doing, as the scandal of her life seems always about to overshadow the fascination for her reading public" (70). What Labbe touches on is the elemental tension in Robinson's creation of a pathetic victim. Her audience, even if they can look past her scandalous life

to find sympathy for her character(s), can never look far enough beyond their own social modes of thought to realize or accept exactly what Robinson is trying to accomplish.

In a review of her Lyrical Tales published in the Monthly Review in September of 1801, the critic writes that the tales are “calculated to touch the soul with pity, and to fill the eye with tears” (SP 386). Despite acknowledging Robinson’s aim at pathos, the critic dismisses the poems as nothing more than a cathartic exercise on the part of the poet. The review is interesting in that it condones a sympathetic view towards Robinson, but seemingly the sympathy is only a tactful way to brush aside the slightest acknowledgment of any true poetic achievement. The critic writes:

She has displayed the power of touching the chords [of her lyre] with pathos. As her life, though in some periods gay and dazzling, was deeply tinged with sorrow, her muse is of the somber cast; and though, being desirous of giving variety to her tales, she sometimes endeavours to be sprightly, her efforts are evidently forced, and she soon relapses into the dark and fearful region of tragic invention. She takes her harp from the willow on which it hung, to attune it to sounds of woe, to harrow up the soul, and to impress on the imagination the melancholy truth that human life is indeed a *vale of tears*. If she described it as she found it, we must not only forgive her, but lament her unfortunate destiny; yet we do not recommend it to our readers to cherish these gloomy representations of our present state, which the wounded mind feels a satisfaction in delineating. (SP 386)

The conjectural “if” in “If she described it as she found it” undermines what sympathy the critic grants Mary Robinson, as if to imply that Robinson may stretch her own life story into the realm of “tragic invention.” The ambiguity of this critic’s response to the poetry of Mary Robinson is absent in another critic’s review from 1801, whose response can be labeled anything but ambiguous, that says, “we surely want not public panegyrics upon characters which have been lost to decency and shame” (Todd 272). Like the marble tomb that overshadows the grave of the Poor, Singing Dame, Mary Robinson’s reputation loomed larger than her poetry and would remain that way for centuries after her death.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

In a letter to Thomas Poole, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes of Mary Robinson, “O Poole! [if] that Woman had but been married to a noble Being, what a noble Being she herself would have been. Latterly, she felt this poignant anguish.—Well!” (Griggs 669) Coleridge’s comment exposes the thought processes of the culture that consumed her character. Had Thomas Robinson been what he purported or had she successfully formed an attachment with the Prince, things may have turned out differently for Mary Robinson. Implicit in Coleridge’s comment is the possibility of a redemptive alliance with himself. Tim Fulford describes Coleridge as “the Lake District man and poet to whom Robinson appeals in her dying weakness, [who] becomes in his own eyes, the poetic husband who restores her lost nobility and respectability” (10). All of the perspectives intrinsic to the statement filter through an outside, patriarchal view. In Coleridge’s surmisal, he silences Mary Robinson’s voice. Like the Academy artists, Coleridge, in his attempt to frame Robinson as an unfortunate victim of fate, denies her any autonomy and artistic integrity. His statement also reveals the short-sighted chivalry of the eighteenth century mind-set. According to Coleridge, Mary Robinson’s only options for avoiding the judgments of the society around her were an attachment with a “noble Being” or the shallow pathos of civility.

At times in her poetic exploration of victimization, Mary Robinson adopts the authorial positions suggested by Coleridge. Their “Snow-Drop” exchange embodies the chivalric pathos of a “noble Being.” Robinson, in her highly sentimentalized depiction of the victimization of the snow-drop by the elements of nature, invites the “PITY” of

Coleridge's sympathetic poetic response. Veiled in their poems ostensibly written about a flower, Mary Robinson's own biography charges the poems with complexities. Continually impacted by her visual representation in the media of her day, Robinson writes to counteract the influence of the images. In her "Ode to the Snow-Drop," the sentimental depiction of herself as a "weak and wan" snow-drop opposes the sardonic images of herself as a victimizer, but at the same time, Robinson assumes an authorial position that inevitably plays to the cultural ideology that first labeled her as a seductress.

As only an adept actress could, Mary Robinson constantly shifts her stance as poet. By shifting her authorial position, however slight this shift might be, she continually attempts to refine and edge closer to an effective depiction of the victim in her poetry, as one further removed from her "self" or reputation. In "The Poor, Singing Dame," Mary Robinson adopts a poetical stance more distant from herself with a speaker focused on the political injustices heaped on the Dame. Moving away from the stigmatizing influence of her reputation, Robinson creates an evocative portrayal of the victim. Though sentimental in its depiction of the Dame, "The Poor, Singing Dame" offers a genuine portrait of the discrepancies of the classes in eighteenth-century England. Robinson also cunningly empowers her victim as she slides away from her own biography to other fictitious subjects, and she energizes her innocent victim in the Dame with the power to critique her victimizers. The critical powers of her victim dissipate in credibility and strength only when she allows her biography to slip back into the poem with the revelation of the Dame's name as "Mary."

Although at times Mary Robinson struggled to move beyond sentimentalized depictions of victims dictated by her reputation as determined by patriarchal code, some

of her poems smash those stereotypes to offer trenchant social criticism. In her poem “The Lascar,” her young Lascar Boy begins a pilgrimage after fasting for four days. The poem epitomizes Robinson’s most effective shift of authorial position and use of her victim to criticize the society that victimizes allegedly ignoble persons. The boy’s interactions in the poem vividly illustrate how Robinson used her victim to evoke empathy for those not considered to be or lacking attachments to “noble Beings.” Along his pilgrimage “none would an Indian wand’rer bless; / None greet him with the fond caress; / None feed him, though with hunger keen / He at the Lordly gate were seen” (115-8). After being turned away from the Lordly gate by a “surly Porter” and his fierce mastiff, the Lascar comes to a church, lead by the “church-bell’s merry peal” (145). Mary Robinson’s feelings on the church stand out in the last stanza of the first half of the two part poem:

With keen reproach, and menace rude,  
The LASCAR Boy away was sent;  
And now again he seem’d subdu’d,  
And his soul sicken’d, as he went.  
Now, on the river’s bank he stood;  
Now, drank the cool refreshing flood;  
Again his fainting heart beat high;  
Again he rais’d his languid eye;  
Then, from the upland’s sultry side,  
Look’d back, forgave the wretch, and sigh’d!  
While the proud PASTOR bent his way

To preach of CHARITY — and PRAY! (157-68)

Robinson's poem is structured to evoke sympathy for the Lascar and criticize a hypocritical and indifferent power structure. As her poem certainly evinces the pathos that she aimed for, her readers in many cases were forced to convict themselves or, in this example, their church. In order to pity the Lascar, readers must deem the Pastor's actions reprehensible. Because a poem like "The Lascar" forced the society that created such designations to face its own hypocrisy, critics generally ignored Robinson's more politically subversive poems. The discourse of the male hegemony dictated the poetics of victimization during Robinson's lifetime and preferred poems like "Ode to the Snow-Drop" that played into that discourse. The imbalance in the powers of poetic expression guided Mary Robinson through her evolving perspective as a poet and her ever-developing portrayal of the victim. Yet as she operated within the discourse of the patriarchic culture, Robinson also manipulated the dialogue, twisting the words of society in order to expose injustice and indict those responsible.

While modern readers look back on Robinson's victims with the distance of centuries between Robinson's moral reputation and her work, one can only wonder how a "wounded mind" like her own must have felt about the reception of her art. Did she expect the disapprobation of her contemporaries, or did their cold reception disconcert Mary Robinson's ego? In what seems a close approximation to answers to questions similar to these, Robinson describes her ability to dissemble in a letter written to William Godwin on August 24, 1800, months before she died. She writes to proffer peace in a misunderstanding between the two and deny the charge of "withdrawing [her] regard" (369). She argues for the importance of dissembling "in the broad circle of society" and



laments her inaptitude at such a skill. Her statements seem to correlate rather lucidly with the idea of her pathetic victim and how her dissembling victim is received. Much like Labbe's assertion that "the scandal of her life seems always about to overshadow the fascination for her reading public," Robinson argues in the letter that her own persona will not allow her any success deceiving her contemporaries:

I cannot, I never could dissemble; whatever feeling actuates my soul, that feeling is instantaneously visible, even to less discerning Eyes than *Yours*. In the broad circle of society it is frequently convenient, some will maintain that it is justifiable, to assume a character, rather than to sustain one. I am living proof that such artifice is advantageous, and that to be impervious, is to ensure a long succession of pains and disappointments! Had I been an artificial creature—I might have been in wealth and vulgar estimation, a creature to be envied! But the impetuosity of my temper; the irritability of my feelings;—the proud, [indifferent], [resentful] energy of my soul, placed a barrier between me and Fortune, which has thrown a gloom on every hour of my existence[.] So much for *Self*. (369)

Her emotional and compelling language readily entices the sympathies of her reader. By placing herself as an unsuccessful dissembler to stress the importance of such a quality in an artificial society, she invites her reader into a human camaraderie, coaxing down Godwin's guard. To believe, however, that Mary truly laments an inability to dissemble would be as credulous as Godwin falling for her obsequious show of self-abnegation. Mary Robinson knows her talent as an actress or dissembler, and she knows what she aims to accomplish in her self-presentation of the letter. Remarkably, she crafts her self

as a victim unto herself in the letter to Godwin. This presentation of herself comes closest to the actuality of her situation. Like her “Self” in the letter, Robinson’s manipulation of her reputation constantly complicates her ability to reinvent herself as a victim in the public’s eye.

As complicated as the “breeches” roles of her acting career, Mary Robinson’s poetry eludes any simplified reading, operating in and out of discourse contrary to its very purpose, continually changing perspective, and inviting sympathy at the same time it invokes criticism. The authorial positions she adopts in her poetry reflect the diverse visual representations of herself and delineate an enigmatic poet and persona continually striving to rewrite a lifetime of misrepresentation in the print media. Although her creation of pitiable victims invites and encourages the pathos of her readers, to assume that the only modality of Robinson’s portrayal of victims entails sympathy belies the ingenuity of her poetic vision. Ignoring ulterior motives for the pathetic dimension of her art muffles the voice of an autonomous artist and denies the critical power of her poetry. The unwary reader seduced by the sensibilities of Robinson’s creation of pitiable victims neglects her prowess as a social critic and ignores the dangers of credulity.

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